



Statement of Kaitlynn Hetrick

Before the

House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

April 14, 2021

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Associate, Government Affairs
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans Of America
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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America's (IAVA) more than 425,000 members, thank you for the opportunity to share our views, data, and experiences on the pending legislation before the Subcommittee today.

IAVA appreciates the Subcommittee for bringing forward important legislation that touches on many of our priorities for 2021, which are: Defense of Veterans Education Benefits, Employment, Military Family Stability, and Transition, Minority and Underserved Veterans, Ending Veteran Homelessness, and VA Reform.

I come to you today as not only an Associate of Government Affairs at IAVA but as a woman veteran, former military spouse, and mother. I am also the daughter of a Navy veteran, sister of a Marine Gunnery Sergeant, and have more family members that are serving or have served than I can count. Military service and love for my country and those that served is not just something I choose to do but has been instilled in me since I was a young child.

I served as an Aviation Electronics Technician in the world's finest Navy and chose to leave service to spend more time with my toddler son. It was a choice that I never wanted to make but knew was the right one at that time. My experiences transitioning following my service are all too common. And when I chose to serve as my university's student veteran organization president, I saw first hand the multitude of issues that affect our nation's veterans when they hang up their boots and rejoin the civilian world. This sparked a fire in me to never stop advocating for those that feel there aren't any options and who have given up asking for help. This is why I am here today.

Defend Veterans Education Benefits

In IAVA's latest member survey, 75% of IAVA members reported having used, currently using, or transferring their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit. And 87% agree the Post-9/11 GI Bill is important to



military recruitment and 87% believe it is extremely or very important to transition to civilian life.¹

Since its inception, the Post-9/11 GI Bill has faced threats of funding cuts and abuse, which is why IAVA continues to #DefendTheGIBill. However, it has also seen unprecedented expansion. In 2017, IAVA worked with VSO partners to pass the *Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act*, which included numerous expansions for the GI Bill, including the elimination of the 15-year time limit to use the benefit. While the passage of this legislation was a huge win for IAVA, the switch came with its own glitches.

In the fall of 2018, an IT issue at VA resulted in tens of thousands of veterans not receiving their GI Bill monthly housing stipend for several months. This situation brought a stampede of unnecessary stress to many veterans as they worried about losing their homes and feeding their families. As someone that assisted in the certification of veterans benefits at my university during this time, I saw firsthand the ramifications that this situation had. Several of my brothers and sisters were without their allowance for months and had our university not established an emergency fund specifically for veterans, many of them would have not had food on their tables.

Because of situations like this, IAVA is proud to support the legislation up for discussion today that would “implement a modern information technology service to process claims for educational assistance under chapters 30, 33, 35, and 36 of title 38.” We must ensure that the systems in place to process their education claims are modernized and that veterans choosing to utilize their earned education benefits are not caused undue stress from the administration established to help them.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a wealth of problems in addition to the public health crisis. Some of the most severely affected by this were students. Most schools were forced to close and offer only online courses, in which not all courses have this ability. After the pandemic created a large problem with veterans and their eligibility for their full GI Bill housing allowance, IAVA joined Student Veterans of America, Veterans Education Success, and many others stepped up to action to ensure legislation was passed to guarantee that student veterans were still eligible to receive their full housing allowance despite their classes being switched to online. This was not the only issue that the pandemic brought for student veterans. Because of the switch to virtual learning, some students were forced to put their educational goals on hold due to the lack of their program being offered. For some, this had catastrophic consequences as their time limit for using their GI Bill benefit expired. When it comes to situations that are out of a veteran’s control, such as a national emergency, we must ensure that VA’s educational programs are flexible. Because of this, IAVA strongly supports the draft bill by **Rep. Sherrill (D-NJ)** “to provide for extensions of the time limitations for use of entitlement under VA educational assistance programs by reason of school closures due to emergency and other situations and other purposes.” Veterans,

¹ IAVA Member Survey 2019. Retrieved from <http://iava.org/survey>



survivors, and dependents should not be faulted and miss out on their educational goals because of a pandemic or natural disaster.

Veterans are proven to be more productive and have higher retention rates once they begin a career, and ensuring they have the appropriate training and degrees is paramount to this success.² We also must recognize that there are a large number of veterans who choose to not attend a college or university, and instead prefer to learn a trade. The *Bringing Registered Apprenticeships to Veterans Education Act* ([H.R. 147](#)) introduced by **Reps. Norcross (D-NJ), Fitzpatrick (R-PA), Lamb (D-PA), Slotkin (D-MI)**, would provide information to all transitioning servicemembers on registered apprenticeships. This legislation would also require that VA develop an easy-to-use online system that connects veterans to VA-certified registered apprenticeship programs. IAVA strongly supports this legislation and feels it would be an excellent addition to VA's education programs and help transitioning servicemembers that would rather begin their career directly after service.

Veterans bring with them a wide array of lived experiences and unique strengths that broaden college campus' diversity. However, ensuring that veterans feel welcome on campus continues to be a major factor in attracting these talented individuals. In IAVA's member survey, the majority of student veterans identified a veteran-friendly environment as a top reason for choosing their school.³ By investing in programs on campus, schools can both support their current student body and attract the interest of more veterans and their families. Because of reasons like this, and IAVA's commitment to advocate for support and funding veteran support programs specifically dedicated to minority servicemembers, veterans, and their families, we support the "*G.I. and Veterans Education Empowerment Act*" which would help veterans, survivors, and dependents to have more in-depth demographic information on universities and colleges available to them.

The Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program is an incredible benefit for dependents of fallen servicemembers and the families of disabled veterans. IAVA supports the draft legislation that would "eliminate the time period for eligibility under Survivors' And Dependents' Educational Assistance Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs." We do not know what lies ahead in life for someone eligible for this program, and the pandemic has shown us that many may choose to switch to a new career path if theirs becomes difficult due to unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, IAVA also supports the draft bill that would "provide for the disapproval by the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs of courses of education offered by public institutions of higher learning that do not charge veterans the in-state tuition rate for purposes of Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance Program." IAVA believes that we should continually be looking for ways to strengthen educational support for surviving families.

² U.S. Department of Labor. Employer Guide to Hire Veteran. September 19, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.dol.gov/veterans/hireaveteran/pdf/Employer-Guide-to-Hire-Veterans-June-2018.pdf>

³ Unpublished Data. IAVA's Member Survey was fielded in February 2017. Over 4000 IAVA member veterans completed the survey.



I personally benefited from the “rounding out” rule. In my final semester of school, I was only in need of my internship and one additional elective to graduate. This provision allowed me to continue serving as the president of my school’s student veteran organization, complete a VA work-study, and still provide for my family. I can honestly say that had I had to get a job on top of my school work, I would have been too busy to continue serving my fellow veterans at my university. That final semester was crucial to me obtaining my current position with IAVA and I firmly believe that if I would not have been able to take advantage of the “rounding out” rule, I would not be sitting here before you today.

My story is not uncommon. Many veterans have used the rule to aid them in not having to add an additional job so that they can focus on their studies as well as take care of their responsibilities. IAVA firmly supports the draft legislation that would “authorize the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide educational assistance under the VA Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program to students who are rounding out during their final semester, term, or academic period, and for other purposes.”

In the past, IAVA has been supportive of the VET TEC program, the benefits that it provides for veterans interested in a fast-track education experience to get into high-tech careers. While we do support this program, IAVA would like to see data on the efficacy of the program before providing such a large increase in funds. IAVA would also like to state that when looking to fund the program - or any other legislation, we strongly oppose the reduction of any GI bill benefits to offset costs.

Employment, Military Family Stability, and Transition

When a servicemember transitions out of the military, one of the largest and most significant barriers to employment is not only pairing military skills to relevant civilian careers but also in licensure and formal accreditation. Many veterans report that business leaders and various institutions simply do not understand the value they bring to their companies and organizations.

There are multiple tracks to veteran and military family employment and matching veterans to the right career. Unfortunately, finding the right job can be difficult when employers do not understand a veteran’s skills and experience. This continues to be a contributing factor for recently discharged veterans’ unemployment and underemployment. According to IAVA’s last member survey, 34% of respondents felt underemployed. Being able to translate military skills for civilian use is their third most important job factor, behind mental health injuries and competing with candidates who have been in the civilian workforce longer, our members look at when looking for work. It is in everyone’s best interest to get the fit right. Veterans and military spouses who have jobs in their preferred career field do better work and remain in those jobs for longer.



This is why IAVA supports the draft bill that would "Direct the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training to establish a pilot program on short-term fellowship programs for veterans." Fellowship programs help to sharpen professional skills, offer hands-on experience, make you stand out when it comes to job hunting, and much more. A fellowship program dedicated to veterans would provide veterans the ability to bolster their resumes as well as increase the potential for them to find gainful employment within the federal government. We would offer a suggestion that aligns with our support for another piece of legislation up for discussion.

Programs like in the aforementioned draft, and those offered by DoL Vets would be much more effective under the blanket of the VA. This is why IAVA supports the draft legislation that would "establish in the Department the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration, and for other purposes." This legislation would create a fourth administration at VA that would align all veterans' education, transition, and job placement programs under one agency entitled the Veterans Economic Opportunity and Transition Administration. This new administration would be led by the Under Secretary for Economic Opportunity.

Veterans we speak to have long reported that overlapping services have clouded options rather than clarified them. GAO reports and feedback from previous IAVA member surveys have indicated the performance of Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVERs) and Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists under DoL VETS have not shown the improvement needed to help veterans begin careers. Ineffective oversight and the incongruent placement of this service within a myriad of other programs at DoL have not proven to fit as well as they could.

IAVA has previously likened this to having a Member of the House of Representatives posted in an office in the Senate, while still being responsible for legislative outcomes in the House—it does not make much sense. The time to change the status quo and put veterans first is now.

Finally, IAVA supports **Rep. Cicilline's (D-RI) "Protecting the Employment Rights of Servicemembers Act"** ([H.R. 2195](#)) which will clarify the scope of procedural rights of servicemembers concerning their employment and reemployment rights. Servicemembers should not be forced to waive their rights to use the court system and should be protected from forced arbitration.

Minority and Underserved Veterans

American Indian and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) have a long history of distinguished U.S. military service. They serve at a higher rate per capita than any other cohort of Americans and have served in all the nation's wars since the Revolutionary War, and in several wars before they were even recognized as citizens. Despite their service, AI/AN veterans have lower incomes, higher unemployment rates, and are more likely to lack health insurance than other veterans. Because of these reasons, IAVA is proud to support the "*Native VetSuccess at Tribal Colleges and*



Universities Pilot Program Act’ which would establish a pilot program at Tribal Colleges and Universities to connect Native veterans to VA services and vocational support.

End Veteran Homelessness

The VA did not accomplish its plans to end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015, but it has made some significant progress. This is in large part due to private, local, and nonprofit partners who have teamed with VA to implement solutions.

The number of homeless veterans has declined since 2010, and in fact, has dropped nearly 50% since 2010. Despite advances made in recent years, there are still tens of thousands of veterans who remain homeless on a single night. In IAVA's latest survey, 24% reported going without a home for over a year after they transitioned out of the military, and 81% reported couchsurfing temporarily. Housing and homelessness-related referrals are among the services most requested through IAVA's Quick Reaction Force (QRF), a free 24/7 case management program for veterans and their families; in 2020 alone, IAVA provided hundreds of veterans and family members with housing and homelessness-related support.

This generation of veterans is challenging the traditional image of the single, male veteran that came to characterize homeless veterans following the Vietnam War. Homeless veterans today may have families or may be women veterans. Women veterans historically are at higher risk for homelessness than their civilian counterparts⁴. For these reasons, IAVA strongly supports the *"Affordable Housing for Homeless Veterans Act."* Creating solutions to aid homeless veterans in obtaining affordable housing is paramount.

Additionally, IAVA is supportive of the *"Homeless Veterans Credit Repair, Enhancement, and Debt Improvement for Tomorrow Act"* ([H.R. 1257](#)). It is widely known that servicemembers are often targeted by credit agencies from the moment they ship off to boot camp. Cash advance establishments are plentiful right outside many military bases and I can remember being flooded with credit card offers within months of joining, something I was not experiencing before. In IAVA's most recent survey, 36% of our members believed they may have or did experience predatory loan practices.

Credit education is not standard practice within our educational systems so it is easy to see how our newly capped brothers and sisters could view these offers as a good idea. While the military does provide a guaranteed paycheck that helps to keep up with debt, many veterans experience difficulties after leaving. Sixty-six percent of IAVA members stated that they did not have a job secured upon leaving service. There would be great benefits from the [H.R. 1257](#), and understanding how credit counseling could help to reduce the number of homeless veterans.

⁴ <https://www.va.gov/homeless/nchav/docs/hers-womens-proceedings.pdf>



VA Reform

As the housing market is currently booming for buyers, IAVA is cautiously supportive of the *“Value Added Homes for Veterans Act.”* While we see the reason for adding energy data in the requirements for purchasing a home with a VA loan, we must bring it to the attention of the committee that in our current climate especially, veterans are finding it increasingly difficult to purchase homes when competing with conventional loans or even cash. Buyers are waiving inspections and simplifying the process to shorten the time it takes to close, something those choosing to use the VA home loan cannot complete. We must ensure that if there are additional requirements, it does not add more stress to our veterans and their families. The home buying process is already stressful. We support additional transparency when veterans are using the VA home loan however we would like to ensure that this does not add any additional complications.

The adaptive vehicle program is instrumental in aiding service-connected veterans in obtaining transportation suited to their needs. IAVA strongly supports this program and while we support the spirit of the draft legislation “to authorize VA to provide or assist in providing an additional vehicle adapted for operation by disabled individuals to certain eligible persons, and for other purposes,” we have concerns over the availability of funding for the continued health of the program to benefit veterans with service-connected injuries.

Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to share IAVA’s views on these issues today. I look forward to working with the Subcommittee in the future.



Biography of Kaitlynne Hetrick

Kaitlynne Hetrick serves as IAVA's Government Affairs Associate, helping to lead IAVA's advocacy efforts in Washington, D.C. She served in the United States Navy for four years as an Aviation Electronics Technician 3rd Class. Since departing from the Navy in 2014, she used her GI bill to obtain her bachelor's degree at Baldwin Wallace University while working with her fellow student veterans. Serving first as the secretary of her university's Student Veterans of America chapter and then as the president, Kaitlynne worked to help fellow student vets take advantage of all the programs offered to them due to their service. Kaitlynne has also worked with several veteran non-profits to help disabled and transitioning former servicemembers.